

# Women's rights in iran during the years of the shah, ayatollah khomeini, and khamenei

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRAN:  
DURING THE YEARS OF THE SHAH, AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI, AND KHAMENEI

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in International and Global Studies  
in the College of Sciences  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Women's rights have been a historically controversial issue. This is no exception in Iran, where the struggle between modernization and keeping with traditional Islamic values has been a topic of constant disagreement between political leaders. Women in Iran have experienced many changes in their personal rights and freedoms throughout the decades. This research focuses on religion and culture, the policies of the main leaders of Iran in the past decades, and the role of non-governmental organizations as factors that expand or limit the rights and freedoms of women. It attempts to identify which factor is mostly responsible for the position that women have been historically placed in.

The intent of this thesis is to research the rights and conditions of women in Iran. In general the question could be proposed as "are the lives of women in Iran better off today than in the past?" In the western world there are many stereotypes that are oftentimes attached to women, such as the notions that they are not allowed to pursue an education or career and that they do not have any legal rights. Evidence shows that these notions are not accurate in contemporary Iran, and that women have made significant strides in gaining their rights and freedoms. Through the analysis of several case studies, literature reviews, and statistical evidence, this thesis seeks to identify the factors that most affect women's rights and freedoms. By analyzing the factors that have historically placed women at a disadvantage in Iranian society, and better understanding their lives, this thesis aims to fight the stereotypes placed upon them as well as raise awareness for the continuing plight of women in Iran today.

## **DEDICATION**

For my Mother, who gave countless hours of her time to read and critique this thesis, and whose constant guidance and support have made me the person I am today.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Women's rights in Iran have fluctuated with each change in leader and regime for the past several decades. These regimes have had the power to dictate every aspect of women's lives, from voting rights to their daily dress code; oftentimes, without the input or approval of the women it was affecting. Women, as a group, in Iran have been placed at a disadvantage in society due to laws and legislations that affect their personal freedoms. My thesis seeks to explain the extent to which women's rights and freedoms were, and still are, affected under different leaders and political institutions. More specifically, I will focus on the fluctuations in women's rights under the leadership of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Ayatollah Khamenei.

I expect the changes in the degree of women's freedoms will prove to have been compromised in the last decades due to the leaders pursuing their personal ambitions and vision for Iran. Women's rights are affected by the policies such leaders pursue. In this regard, I will analyze the impact of each leader in the following chapters.

### **Factors**

There are multiple factors responsible for the fluctuations in women's rights. The changes that have affected women throughout their lives in Iran, I believe are mostly the result of the leaders seeking to reform legislation or ordering decrees to transform the country into what they in vision for Iran. These factors could also originate from religious leaders proclaiming fatwa's, enforcing Islamic law, or pressuring legislature in order to curb the population into a more pure Islamic society. Lastly, the changes in women's rights could stem from modifications in political institutions, and government styles. This thesis will analyze where the changes in

women's rights stem from, as well as if any of the factors mentioned are responsible for these fluctuations. I expect the changes in the degree of women's freedoms to originate from the leaders themselves, resulting from the individual leaders pursuing their vision for Iran, and that women's rights are affected by the policies these leaders pursue.

### **Significance**

It is important to study what factors have historically placed women at a disadvantage in Iranian society, whether the oppression comes from political regimes, the society, or the leadership of a single individual. These factors could all, or none, be responsible for the oppression of half of a country's population. By better understanding the manner that these laws or changes directly affect women's rights and freedoms, and how they developed, it becomes easier to understand the current situation of women. Women in Iran in the past decades were placed at a disadvantage socially and economically solely because of their gender. Most depended on a male figure to provide their income and the laws of the country encouraged the empowerment of males and the subjugation of females. These laws made life for women increasingly difficult.

Divorce is one example of how a woman is placed at a disadvantage in Iranian society. Historically, women could not initiate divorce, regardless of their situation at home, only males could initiate a divorce. This was an obstacle for women seeking to terminate a marriage that they were unhappy with or even an abusive relationship. In addition if the divorce was granted, the males automatically received custody of the children and women encountered very little legal recourse to change this outcome. This discouraged women with children to leave a marriage they were unhappy with.

It is also significant to study the position of women in Iran to gain a better understanding of the culture and the real challenges women face. By comprehending these factors and becoming informed of women's situation in Iran, stereotypes of these women can be challenged and changed. The fact that most "Westerners" regard Iranian women as passive and submissive, and restricted to the confines of their homes, is a grave inaccuracy for women in contemporary Iran.

In contemporary Iran, women have made significant advances despite odds that had been placed before them. Changes in the country's laws at the behest of women themselves and the international community have allowed women to have several legal protections. There are several examples of this. In 2002, the outdated and horrendous practice of stoning to death as a means to punish immorality or dress code violations was changed to a monetary fine or time in jail. Several articles have also been added to the Constitution to ensure that divorced or widowed women have some means of support and legal means to enforce this. Articles protecting children by rising the legal age of marriage and granting custody of the children to the mother after a divorce have also been ratified (Iranian UN Report 2003).

### ***Hijab, Suffrage, and Family Laws***

Before I begin to discuss the impact of each leader on women's rights, it is important to provide some brief background information on the *hijab*, women's suffrage, and the Family Protection Laws.

During the reign of the Shah, his vision for the country was to modernize it. The Shah wanted to show the world that Iran could compete with the West and be just as modern as the

Western countries. In pushing this agenda, the Shah targeted certain aspects of society to accomplish this goal.

The traditional dress styles were discouraged in society while the Shah was in power. The *hijab*, or headscarf, for women was outlawed, and forcibly removed if used in public. In addition both the Shah and his wife dressed in Western style attire to set an example for the population and how they should dress, and expected all government employees to do the same. The Shah strongly believed that if there was a visible outer change in the manner of dress of the Iranian people, a deeper, inner shift towards a more Western society would occur. Under his leadership, women gained suffrage, while several laws were passed to protect women and give them rights to access legal courts, such as the Family Protection Laws. The Family Protection Laws were a collection of laws whose purpose was to protect women and give them legal courses of action if social problems arose. The laws acknowledged basic problems women had within the family, and touched on subjects such as divorce, child custody and abortion. Before these laws, there were few to no legal actions women could initiate against men.

While women in Iran made some advances during the first decades of the Shah's reign, towards the end, and demise of the Shah, the entire country experienced a tightening of control over their personal freedoms. The Shah of Iran lacked the charisma to rally the population in his favor, and so he resorted to a very patrimonial style of rule. Pictures of the Shah and his family were found in all government buildings, statues were erected in his name, and the quantity of images of the Shah around the country gave the impression that his presence was everywhere.

All these shrines were a reminder to the people of Iran of who their leader was, and that he was continuously watching them.

In the late years of the Shah's rule, an organization known as the SAVAK, commonly known as the Shah's secret police, was created to watch over the people. The result was the closing of many sites where civilians congregated, including many women's centers, and organizations. The fear the Shah had that he was going to be overthrown, led to the regression of much of the progress that women had experienced. The secret police closed down any place where people could discuss potentially dangerous ideas or plot revolutions against the Shah, and once again institutions that had been created for women were taken away without their opinions or consent. The oppression the people felt in these later years led to the emergence of Khomeini. He called for the people to rise against the oppression of the Shah, and led the eventual Revolution of 1979.

### **Ayatollah Khomeini**

At first, the charismatic and impressive leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, encouraged women to go out and voice their opinions, to protest the regime of the Shah, and promised them a hopeful future. Women had an important part in the revolution and the ousting of the Shah. The cause and hope for equality with men transcended economic and social class, therefore during the revolution, women of all social strata took to the streets in support of the Ayatollah. Once the Ayatollah was placed in power, women expected that their rights and personal freedoms would flourish under the new leadership. Instead, the Ayatollah set out to create the first true and pure Islamic state. He ordered that many women with professional jobs

be fired and urged women to take up the duties in their household, and focus on matters appropriate to their gender rather than pursue career goals or higher education. As a result, many educated women and their professional skills were not utilized simply because of their gender. In time, women were allowed to slowly return to the workforce into certain, gender appropriate, fields of work, such as midwifery, and teaching.

Ayatollah Khomeini's vision for Iran was to return to conservative Islamic values, and purge the Western influences. This vision led to the repeal of the Family Protection Laws, the outlawing of Western styles of dress, and strict enforcement of the Islamic dress code. Women were also discouraged from pursuing higher education, and having successful careers under the early leadership of Khomeini. They were encouraged to focus on their family life, serving their husbands and properly raising children. During the time Ayatollah Khomeini was in power women experienced a regression in the rights they were accustomed to.

### **The Khamenei Years**

When Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1989, there was a vacancy left in the leadership position since there was no clear successor. Once Khamenei was chosen as the next leader, there was a stark contrast in their leadership style. Khomeini could be viewed as the glue that held the revolution together and the person who kept its ideals alive. With the death of the leader there was no clear driving force in the country. In addition, Khamenei did not immediately obtain the respect of the people or the other leaders of the country, and he was instead regarded as a weak leader (Jahanpour). Khamenei has remained in power as Iran's supreme leader since the death of

Khomeini. In his lifetime, women have made significant strides in improving their opportunities and positions socially in Iran.

Women have overcome numerous obstacles to achieve their place in society today. While it is true that after the revolution their career choices and legal recourses were limited, I do not believe that is the case today. Women slowly have regained their right to attend universities, and study in a field of their choosing. In addition, many legal changes to the constitution have improved the rights of women, in regards to inheritance, and custody rights. While the conservative Islamic dress code is still enforced, women are constantly challenging it by what some have called “*the battle of the hairlines*” (Esfandiari 48). This has been used in reference to the battle between common women and the morality police as to how much hair can be shown while wearing the *hijab*, and has become a symbol of defiance against the forcibly imposed conservative Islamic dress code.

In addition, the government of Iran has made strides to narrow the inequality gap between men and women by funding programs to teach women, especially in rural areas, to use computers and become proficient with basic computer programs. As well as fund programs that help educate women on handling financial aspects of their lives, and create small businesses.

## **Major Content**

Scholars have written multiple books on the experience women have had with the changes in regimes, changes in the interpretation of religion, and changes in leaders. Authors J.S. and T.Y. Ismael depict Khomeini as both a political and ideological leader. His charismatic personality and strong leadership skills fueled the revolution. There is strong evidence to suggest



that the government of Iran that was formed after the revolution was created based on the ideas of Khomeini. Ismael outlines that the new government was created based on four main objectives; “To enforce the laws of the Shari'a justly, to combat oppression of the rights of ordinary individuals and to eradicate corruption, to fight "heresies and errors" that are legislated by false parliament, [and] finally to prevent the intervention of foreigners in the affairs of the Moslems” (Ismael 613). These notions were depicted by Khomeini and were implemented in the new government. Khomeini also stated that new leaders of Iran should be chosen on the basis of their understanding of Islamic law and, secondly, on their ability to make and enforce just decisions (Ismael 614). The fact that Khomeini was a leader in both political and religious spheres strengthens my hypothesis that during his reign in Iran most policies that were implemented that affected woman’s lives were initiated by the Ayatollah himself in pursuing his vision for Iran.

Haleh Esfandiari wrote *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution*. In her book, she interviews 32 women on their experiences before and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Her book concludes that while women did not feel they had many rights under the Shah of Iran, most believed that their rights would expand when Ayatollah Khomeini took power (Esfandiari). Khomeini encouraged women to participate in protests and become active in the revolution. The encouraging words stated by the Ayatollah led women to believe that their future in Iran would be one of equality with men. Yet, that was not the outcome. The general sentiment after the revolution by these 32 women, who were interviewed, is that their rights were diminished under Khomeini. The few rights they had gained under the Shah of Iran were revoked by Ayatollah Khomeini. These women express their belief that under the Shah, they had few, but

did have certain legal recourses they could take if they felt unhappy with a situation whereas under Khomeini there was no room to challenge their personal situation (Esfandiari).

Jane Howard is another author that has written about women's plight in Iran. In 2002, she published *Inside Iran: Women's Lives*, in which it denotes the differences women experienced in their daily lives once the Shah of Iran was overthrown. Women endured changes at the most basic levels, not only regarding their attire, but also experienced restrictions on traveling, driving, and simply getting around their own city. In order to walk anywhere women needed to be accompanied by a male relative; all other contact with men outside the immediate family could result in punishment. The book gives concise descriptions of the liberties women were rapidly denied and the changes they had to adapt to from their point of view. It includes personal accounts and emphasizes on the impact these laws had in women trying to accomplishing daily tasks.

Masoud Kazemzadeh wrote the book *Islamic Fundamentalism, Feminism, and Gender Inequality in Iran under Khomeini*. This book provides a brief historical context for the environment women were living under the Shah, but mostly specifies on the gender inequality women experienced after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It also provides examples of the injustices women suffered such as the strict dress code they were expected to abide by, and quotes the exact law that passed and how the interpretation of the law leads to the suppression of women. The information provided by Kazemzadeh provides the legal context of the origin of the laws passed under Ayatollah Khomeini.

## **Conclusion**

The changes in leadership styles and government altered the nature of women's roles in Iranian society. Women's roles, their rights, and freedoms have since become a major topic in the clash between modernity and the conservative values of the Islamic state. The subject of the *hijab* has led to lively debates between leaders as to whether it should be compulsory, and to some has even been used as a way to measure the effectiveness of the Islamic state. Women's suffrage, careers, and legal rights have also been topics of debate within each government system.

My thesis seeks to explain the different factors that prompt the subjugation women experienced in Iran from the time the Shah rose into power until today, and how some of these factors have been overcome. To accomplish this, each chapter in my thesis will be a case study of the period of time each leader was in power and will utilize the political leader himself, religion and culture, and non-governmental organizations as the variables responsible for the oppression of women within society. These variables will then be used to explain how women's rights and freedoms were, and still are, affected in Iran, as well as factors that have been overcome by the women themselves.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE SHAH OF IRAN**

In this chapter I will discuss the impact of the Shah and his policies on women's rights and freedoms. The Shah undertook several initiatives such as the unveiling of the population and family planning among others that had a significant impact on the advancement of women.

### **Religion and Culture**

Reza Shah Pahlavi, the father of the future leader of Iran Mohammed Reza Shah, reigned from 1926 to 1941. During the rule of Reza Shah, little was done to improve the condition of women in society. Reza Shah Pahlavi visited the country of Turkey during his time in power. The extensive progress that the leader of Turkey, Ataturk, had made during his rule provoked the Shah to want to emulate his accomplishments and modernize Iran. The advancement of women through education had westernized Turkey and had had a positive impact on the country. The Shah believed that the lack of women's rights was one of the many issues he had to reform in order to westernize Iran. He determined that this would be accomplished partly through the unveiling of women and increasing their education. Although Reza Shah wanted to advance Iran, the methods he employed to do so were not effective. The unveiling of women shocked society and the law was only able to be enforced for a brief period of time before the *chador* was utilized again. The Shah attempted to enforce other major reforms; however, these did not grant women suffrage or provide them with opportunities to advance themselves (Bill and Springborg).

### **Policies**

In 1936, Reza Shah abolished the veil. This was one of the boldest and most controversial laws passed under the Shah in regards to women. Many of the Shah's ministers warned him

against such a radical approach as abolishing the veil. The ministers under the Shah wanted to take a gradual approach by first legally allowing women to be unveiled if they so desired, as well as providing protection for these women to walk in public without a veil. This would provide a safe environment for women, encouraging the women who wanted to become unveiled to do so. Instead, the Shah took the extreme approach to attempt to eradicate the veil through a royal decree (Mir-Hosseini 41). This drastic measure was shocking to many women and was not all positive. In the Shah's attempt to pressure Iran to appear a more Western style society, the Shah forced all of the society to follow his royal decree, including those who preferred to wear the veil.

In traditional Iranian society, some women felt more protected by wearing the *chador*, and felt that going out into public without one was the equivalent of walking in the streets naked (Mir-Hosseini 41). Many men were outraged and felt they had not protected the family honor by allowing women in their family to be seen in public exposed. Although the unveiling was welcomed by some of the younger generations of women, the older and more traditional generations of women had a particularly difficult time following this decree. Many of the traditional women opted to stay within the confines of their homes rather than experience the humiliation of being exposed in public (Howard 58). In addition, civil servants were expected to be the role models for the new society. This meant taking their female family members into public without any headscarf or *chador* in order to show that this was the correct way for women to dress, a notion that was not welcomed by many associated with the government. This measure was imposed on the society by police force when necessary (Esfandiari 24). If women were seen in public wearing a headscarf, police had the power to remove it forcefully, or even arrest them

for violating the decree. Reza Shah's desire that women become unveiled was never fully successful, for by 1941, Reza Shah had been ousted and women were once again wearing the veil (Bill and Springborg).

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi assumed power in 1941 after his father was overthrown. During his first years in power, the country went through periods of instability and turmoil. The Shah was ousted for a brief period in 1953, but resumed power after a CIA and British backed coup d'etat (Mahdi 431). Once Shah Reza Pahlavi was back in power, there was massive social unrest in Iran. The chaos within the country influenced the Shah to launch the White Revolution, a compilation of laws aimed at calming the demands of the people, while simultaneously modernizing Iran. The Shah believed that the laws the country were accustomed to were outdated and needed to be improved. Many laws were altered and reforms were initiated, which had an impact in nearly every aspect of the Iranian peoples' lives. These laws reformed the health industry and the court system, as well as nationalized the country's waterways, and forests (Bill and Springborg). Although many aspects of society in Iran were westernized and "modernized" during the reign of the Shah, the freedom of speech and press were still closely monitored. Opposition to his rule was forcibly discouraged; the authoritarian and paternalistic styles of rule, which were supposed to be revised, remained unchanged.

Despite the heavy criticisms of the reforms under the Shah, women during this era did benefit from some laws and reforms that were enacted. The White Revolution allowed women some rights and freedoms they were previously deprived of. Women before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which permanently ousted the Shah, had a high sense of self worth and

believed that their accomplishments were due to their own merits and hard work and were not limited (Esfandiari 77). As Ayesheh comments in Esfandiari's book *Reconstructed Lives*, “‘if you tell me to move the Alborz Mountains, I will not ask you how you want it done, I will ask you when you want it done.’ ”(Esfandiari 77).

### ***Family Protection Laws***

The Family Protection Laws were some of the first tangible improvements that directly affected women in society. They were regarded by many Iranian women as a measure for the protection of lower-class women. Middle or high-class women were often educated abroad and offered many opportunities and protections not afforded to the lower classes. Yet most accounts agree that after the revolution of 1979 when the laws were suspended, women of all classes became aware of the protections they used to be given. Most of these women believed that they already had a place in Iranian society and that they did not have a reason to question if these laws would always be there or not. Although under the Shah, women's rights were not fully protected, they were afforded some protections under these laws, and many believe they were more protected then, than in the years after the revolution (Esfandiari 77-94).

Nargess, a lawyer living in the pre-revolutionary period in Iran, commented in Esfandiari's book *Reconstructed Lives* that the family Protection Law was a “major development in women's rights. The Women's Organization's effort was to educate middle and lower-class women” (Esfandiari 96). Many women before the revolution were unfamiliar or only superficially familiar with the Family Protection Laws. This allowed women several protections, including the ability to initiate divorce, raising the legal age of marriage for both girls and boys,

and curtailed the practice of polygamy by requiring that spousal permission was obtained before a husband could legally take another wife (Mahdi 432-433). Before these laws were enacted, women were placed at a huge disadvantage when dealing with these family issues both in court and at home. Divorce was rarely granted to a woman, while men could unilaterally divorce their spouse with only two witnesses present. Even if the proceeding was taken to court, the woman wanting a divorce needed to provide sufficient evidence to prove that her marriage merited a legal divorce. Under these Family Protection Laws, the grounds for divorce now included, imprisonment, addiction, abandonment, remarriage without the permission of the wife, or jeopardization of the family prestige by either party. These laws expanded the number of ways a woman could be divorced legally, but it now also extended these same right to women. The laws also referenced the issue of custody in a divorce. Before the Family Protection Laws, the husband or a close male relative would be granted custody of the children. This was a significant issue for the women when seeking a divorce, and a major reason why some women chose to stay in unhealthy marriages. With the passing of these laws women now had the opportunity to end their marriage if they were unhappy and keep their children within their custody. These laws also gave women the right to an abortion under certain circumstances, such as rape or if the mother's life was in danger.

### ***Voting***

Most revolutionary initiatives came with the White Revolution. The White Revolution officially began in 1962 and led to the eventual enfranchisement of women. This enfranchisement came from Prime Minister Asadollah Alam who propagated the Local Councils Law. The law was enacted in October 1962 and attempted to give women partial voting rights by



allowing them to vote in local elections. The clerical community vehemently opposed this law making their views well known. The clerics organized protests and sent letters to the prime minister to repeal the law. They believed that women's suffrage symbolized the fall of public morality. Ayatollah Khomeini, the future leader of Iran, was a key figure in these protests and stated that giving women voting rights was comparable to prostitution (Shoae 524). In addition, they objected to the enfranchisement of women by stating that the few vociferous women who demanded voting rights did not represent the majority of the pious women who did not want these rights. Eventually the uproar caused the prime minister to repeal the law resulting in the loss of women's suffrage once again.

In January of 1963, as a referendum on the White Revolution was held, women were still disenfranchised and, therefore, not allowed to participate. However, on the eve of the referendum, the Minister of Agriculture suggested that the leaders of the women's movement set up their own voting booths in order to voice their opinions. Although their votes did not count towards the official referendum, the results were printed in the papers. The tenacity of these women convinced the Shah to grant them the right to vote and be elected into parliament on February 26, 1963. Parliamentary elections were held the same year in September. For the first time, six women were elected to the Majlis, while two others were appointed by the Shah himself to serve in the Senate (Esfandiari 26-28). This resulted in opportunities for women to advance themselves and achieve high ranking positions.

### **Role of NGO's**

The shutting down and re-opening of women's centers is a reoccurring subject with both Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Shah. Only those organizations affiliated with the

government and following strict standards were allowed to remain open. During the last years of Reza Shah's reign, his paranoia of being overthrown caused him to slowly shut down women's organizations, such as *Jamiat-e Nesvaan-e Vatankhaah-e Iran*, The Patriotic Women's League of Iran in 1932. Recognizing that women needed a place to congregate, the Shah opened *Kaanoon-e Baanovaan*, The Ladies Center in 1934. The main objective of this center was to depoliticize the growing women's movement and redirect their focus towards other causes. This center demonstrated to society that women were still encouraged to be involved and that the country was on the right path to modernization (Mahdi 430). After Reza Shah was overthrown and his son Mohammed Reza Shah took his place, women's centers began to re-appear throughout the country. The Organization of Iranian Women, The Women's Party, The Women's Democratic Organization, and The Women's Progressive Movement are just a few of the many organizations that became available to women. These organizations dealt with various issues concerning women's rights, such as women's education, political involvement, and family and social issues. The Women's League in Iran was highly organized and had various sectors throughout the country. This organization was highly political and was known for its activism towards women's suffrage (Mahdi 431). All these organizations suffered after the 1953 coup d'état. Once the Shah was placed back in power, his desperate attempts to regain control led him to shut down any organization that was associated with politics, including many women's groups.

However, shutting down official women's organizations did not stop women from participating in underground political organizations attempting to overthrow the Shah. Although underground guerilla movements accepted women into their group, there was a certain type of woman that was recruited. Social class, economic level, and educational level were all factors

that contributed to the types of women that joined the movement. Women of lower social classes with limited education were oftentimes unable to join the fight due to their responsibilities at home. Many were also easily persuaded by threats from their employers or government propaganda and were too afraid to voice their opinions. In addition women in the rural areas had limited mobility and few places to gather and discuss ideas. Being exposed to revolutionary ideas, many well-educated women living in urban areas joined the guerrilla movements (Shahidian et al.).

One of the underground political movements that welcomed women was the Left. As members, women were treated equally to men, allowed to carry guns and ammunition, and had important responsibilities within the group, including transporting ammunition and intelligence (Shahidian et al.).

### ***Rise of Khomeini***

In the last fifteen years of the Shah's reign, instability and opposition took hold in the country. The White Revolution had been unsuccessful in appeasing the people of Iran while the guerrilla movement grew stronger and more organized. Dozens of women joined the movement to overthrow the Shah. During this period, the Shah resorted to his secret police, the SAVAK, to regain order and control of his country. Slowly, the country experience a regression in their personal freedoms as censorship became a reoccurring theme and torture became common practice. The increased oppression of the people only led to a more frivolous opposition group. A brief period of liberalization by the Shah followed after the election of Carter into the White House. However, this ended when a popular newspaper in Iran published the question "What is wrong with Iran?" and invited the public to voice their opinion. The response was overwhelming

with over 40,000 letters sent in (Bill and Springborg 148). The Shah took this as a red flag and cracked down once again on the population in a desperate attempt to regain control. Massive nationwide protests ensued. The revolution was further propagated and led by Ayatollah Khomeini, a cleric exiled by the Shah and living in France. Finally, on January 16, 1979, in the midst of rebellion and chaos, the Shah fled the country. He sought asylum in Mexico, and the United States amongst other countries eventually returning to Egypt until he died in 1980 (Bill and Springborg 148).

## **Conclusion**

Under the Shah, employment opportunities for women increased significantly. With the election of women into the *Majlis*, they were encouraged to pursue high-ranking positions within the government, as well as in their personal careers. Women who were selected into high-ranking government positions were often conservative Muslim women, demonstrating that women could still be pious Muslims and have a high-ranking professional career.

Women played an active role in advancing themselves during the era of the Shah. Women such as Mehrangiz Manouchehrian, helped draft the Family Protection Laws, worked on revising the civil code, and ultimately became one of the first female senators (Howard 59). In addition prominent women such as Mehrangiz Daulatshahi and Safeyeh Firouz appealed to the Shah on behalf of the women's movement for electoral rights (Mahdi 431). The women's movement made several strides to attempt and gain attention of their plight for equality, petitions were sent to the Shah's government officials and the United Nations was informed on women's situation in Iran (Mahdi 431).

During Mohammed Reza Shah's rule, women of all classes experienced an increase in their freedoms and rights. Women in the lower classes were the ones who benefitted the most from the social reforms under the Shah. The Family Protection Laws protected custody and divorce rights, prevented the marriage of young girls, and benefited from inheritance laws. Vocational classes also provided the lower class women with skills, such as knitting and sewing, which expanded their independence, and provided them an income source. Although there were some challenges and they were not afforded all the opportunities men had, they were allowed to pursue a higher education. Literacy among women also increased during this period from 8 percent in 1957 to 35 percent in 1977 (Moghissi 46). Women in the upper and middle classes were offered multiple opportunities to advance themselves as well. Women of all classes benefitted from universal suffrage and were allowed to have a voice in politics and laws that affected them.

## Chapter 3: The Khomeini Era

Most women believed that with the overthrow of the monarchy, women's rights would expand, and equality for men and women would be achieved. The frontrunner in the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, a charismatic speaker who called for the overthrow of the monarchy and a return to traditional values, had encouraged women to join the fight against the Shah. Khomeini advocated the creation of a true Islamic state, a new model for the world. Issues regarding women such as dress code and voting rights were not directly addressed by Ayatollah Khomeini during the period of political turmoil, but it was generally assumed that the freedoms women had under the Shah would be kept and under Khomeini would be further expanded.

### Religion and Culture

With the conclusion of the Revolution of 1979, women began to see changes in their everyday lives. Once Ayatollah Khomeini became the leader of Iran, he insisted that *Sharia Law* be instated, and that the elements of Western decadence be purged from society "A return to traditional Islamic values" (Howard 75) was the goal of the new revolutionary government, and this meant that the life styles, particularly of women, living in Iran were to be altered. Ayatollah Khomeini accused the women who demanded their rights to be a few, pampered, minority, stating that the majority of the pious Muslim women would not want the rights demanded anyways. The freedom to travel without their husband's permission, to be employed, and to dress however they chose was the desire of the high-class women whose wants could never be satiated, and therefore should be ignored. Khomeini spoke about the protests and demands women were

making stating that the “westernized” women were blowing the situation out of proportion and were not accurately representing the demands of the majority of women in Iran (Howard 75). Religion was a dominant theme throughout Khomeini’s reign in Iran. His vision for Iran as an Islamic model for the world drove many of his policy implementations, and impacted many of Iran’s people, especially women (Bakhash 58).

As the instatement of Islamic Law intensified in Iran women began to be subjected to changes in their daily routine. Women became limited to interacting only with men that were directly related to them such as their brothers, fathers or husbands. It became a requirement for women to be accompanied by these men at all times and carry proof of their association. Revolutionary guards were allowed to stop women at their own discretion and demand they provided proof that the man they were with was related to them (Afshar 66). If proof could not be provided the punishment could range from a fine to a court indictment. This push for tight supervision control over women by male relatives was also a result from Khomeini’s initiatives to steer Iran into a purified Islamic state. He stated that women’s honor needed to be preserved, and that it was for their own protection that they needed to be accompanied by a male in public.

In addition to the barriers women experienced from the government when attempting to pursue an educational or professional career, women also experienced a lack of support within their families in many cases. Government initiatives had a significant impact on the accessibility women had to paid employment during the years after the revolution. Yet once women were allowed to return to a few specific fields in the workplace, the families of these women were the ones who usually exerted their influence on whether or not they should pursue a job, or a career.

Some fathers supported the idea of their daughters acquiring paid employment, and encouraged them to be independent. This was more often the case with middle and higher class Iranians who lived in urban areas. The exposure of women in the workplace was much greater in the urban areas, and the income level allowed the women to pursue higher education from the beginning. In the lower income classes that lived in the rural areas, the lack of exposure to working women made the idea immodest to some families. Some women experienced pressure from not only their fathers, but extended family to remain at home and not pursue a career. Another factor that may contribute as to why rural women had a harder time in seeking paid employment was that jobs that were attainable for women were found in the urban areas, which meant these women would have to move to the city, away from the supervision of their families, to attain these jobs. This was simply out of the question for many families, which thought the idea of their daughter in a city without supervision unacceptable, and which was frowned upon if a woman wanted to keep her honor.

## **Policies**

During the time of Ayatollah Khomeini many policies regarding dress code, social laws, voting, and family planning among others were implemented that altered women's lives. This next section discusses the policies of Khomeini as pertaining to women. In addition this section outlines how women were affected in their educational as well as professional careers due to these policies.



### *Dress Code*

During the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini several initiatives were taken to execute the vision that Khomeini had for Iran. Institutions such as the center for the Prevention of Vice and Enjoining of Virtue were created. These institutions dealt specifically with women who violated the Islamic Dress Code in any way. These violations could range anywhere from wearing see-through stockings to showing any amount of hair under their *hejab*. The instatement of the Islamic Dress Code meant that women were gradually restricted to only wearing the traditional black chador, and closed toed shoes, and were prohibited from showing their hair. All of these violations were signs of immodesty and for these and many other violations to the dress code, women were to be punished in any way deemed fit, including flogging, under the Islamic Penal Code.

Another measure that was undertaken by the government to ensure the dress code was followed was the training of revolutionary guards to look for imperfections in the dress code. In the period of time directly after the revolution, these imperfections were taken very seriously and many women were harassed for “mal-veiling” or “loose-veiling” (Esfandiari 24). However, there seemed to be cycles in the government as to how strictly the dress code was enforced. Women since the time of Khomeini have been constantly blurring the line between what is proper dress code, and almost improper dress code. These examples can range from showing an inch of hair from beneath their veil, to having put on a hint of makeup. Once these violations start occurring on a widespread scale, the government usually issues a crackdown where women are once again harassed into returning to proper, modest attire. As the government feels it has once again regained control of the situation, they will ease their grip on women’s dress code, giving women

the opportunity to push the boundaries once again. The dress code is a constant topic of conflict between the government and the women in Iran.

### ***Family Protection Laws***

Almost immediately after the revolutionary government took over, the Family Protection Laws were suspended and eventually were abolished (Mahdi 434). With the suspension of these laws, many areas of women's lives were affected. The Family Courts were closed, leaving women with few options in their course of action involving family matters. Women could no longer file petitions for grievances involving issues in their household. This meant that divorce and custody rights were granted solely to the husband or close male relative. In addition, legal marrying age of women was lowered in accordance with Islamic Law to the age of nine. In 1981, the parliament ratified the re-instatement of the Islamic Law of Retribution, in which it allowed the crime of adultery to be punishable by stoning to death. Other laws that were enacted during this time stated that a women's testament in court was only to be valued as half of a man's testament (Mahdi 434).

Women staged various protests during this time to show their disappointment and displeasure with the new government initiatives. They opposed the repeal of the Family Protection Laws, the enforcement of the new dress code, and the restrictions placed on their respective fields of study and careers. In many instances these protests were met with violent ends.

“The regime opposed all these demands and developed counter-strategies to divide the women’s movement and neutralize their struggle. Thereafter, the regime moved quickly to suppress the women’s movement, eliminate all women’s organizations, force women into the *chador*, segregate women in public places such as universities, schools, and government offices, and reduce women’s presence in public life by firing and retiring practices (nearly 24,000 women lost their jobs)” (Mahdi 435).

The regime of the new Ayatollah did not have an interest in addressing the demands of the women’s movement, and used strategies to ensure the demise of these outspoken women. The policies this new government enacted had a severe impact on working and educated women seeking to better themselves, and as stated above 24,000 women were discharged due to their gender (Mahdi 435).

### ***Voting***

In December of 1979, the new Iranian Constitution was ratified. Of the 175 articles, only four pertained to women (Howard 75). Women were still allowed to vote and hold parliament and cabinet positions if they met the proper qualifications. However, they were excluded from becoming judges or the supreme leader of the country. Ayatollah Khomeini’s views on women in parliament were apparent when he was asked if women should be allowed to have seats in parliament. He responded “Can you attain progress by sending a few women to the parliament? ...We say that sending women to these places will lead to nothing but corruption.” (Shoae 522). The Islamic republic stated that women were not allowed to be judges because emotions marred their judgment, and therefore they could not remain objective in their ability to make decisions (Shoae 522). This logic was also applied to women seeking parliamentary positions. Eventually, women were allowed to act as advisors to the official judge in cases that involved

family matters, and were allowed to give their opinion on the situation, but were not allowed to decide on the sentence given.

### ***Family Planning***

Family planning was another initiative by the Shah's regime that was dismantled by the new revolutionary government. The notion of population control was regarded as a purely "Western" idea by the new regime. Under the Shah, small families were encouraged, and educational programs about natural family planning were set up. The year before the revolution, statistics show that the average population growth dropped to about 2.9 percent. These initiatives that had reduced the number of children per household were removed by the new regime. Ayatollah Khomeini "called for the creation of an army of 20 million", to achieve this goal the population had to increase with young people who would join the army and fight for their country (Esfandiari 47). The regime propagated the idea that Iran was stronger the larger its population was and that family planning had been a Western conspiracy to keep the country weak. Furthermore, the regime terminated all educational family planning programs and initiatives.

As a result, in the decade after the revolution there was a population explosion. The regime also used methods to encourage large families. Food stamps were given based on the number of people in a household; therefore, larger numbers were preferred to obtain more food. Only a decade after the revolution the population growth had risen to 3.9 percent. The total population had grown by about 14 million people (Esfandiari 47).

### ***Separation of the Genders***

Another initiative the government under Khomeini undertook was the separation of men and women. Gradually the sexes were separated to maintain the integrity of the women and protect them from the eager eyes of men. The segregation of the genders proved to affect women's daily lives' ranging from children in school to women in the workplace. Children in school were separated based on gender, and were not allowed to have any interaction with the opposite sex. Although initiatives for the same practice to be applied to university students and the common workplace were denied, any intermixing of the sexes in these coed areas was severely frowned upon and could lead to the loss of your job or other forms of punishment (Howard 40).

The government imposed the segregation of sexes in public transportation where women were forced to sit in the back of busses, as the front was reserved solely for males. There are several nuances regarding the separation of the sexes since government initiatives could not cover every aspect of women's lives. While primary schools, ski slopes, sporting activities, and busses are segregated, women and men could still ride in the same taxi together; and the universities, workplace, and general stores such as the supermarket were still coed environments. Men and women still found areas of common ground where they could converse and interact with one another (Howard 40).

### ***Women's Education and Careers***

Women living under Khomeini's regime were discouraged from pursuing higher education particularly during the beginning of the new regime. Women initially were barred

from 69 different subject areas, and were banned from pursuing any career that was not considered fit for a woman to participate in, such as areas in agriculture, law, and public entertainment (Mahdi 434). Through a decree, all women judges were disbarred and forced to resign from their careers during this period (Mahdi 434). These areas were considered male orientated professions. Once the government realized that women were needed to work in certain areas of society some opportunities for women to study arose. The universities allowed women to have some degree of independence from the government, although they were kept under close supervision. The notion of education was more readily available to women living in urban areas mainly due to accessibility to schools and the general trend of higher income. In rural areas, lack of income was often a cause for pulling young girls out of school.

Another factor was the absence of schools in certain towns where girls could attend. This meant that the women seeking education for themselves or their daughters would have to travel to another town where there was a school, which was impossible for some families and frowned upon in others.

An additional factor that contributed to the decreased levels of women seeking higher education or careers was the elimination of child day care centers. All nurseries were closed on the grounds that “nurseries for the children of working mothers [were] a Western conspiracy to deprive youngsters of motherly love and Islamic upbringing” (Howard 75). The closing of childcare facilities caused a great problem for women who wanted to engage in other activities other than caring for their children for the majority of their day (Kian 80). It was one of the many tactics used by the new Islamic government to steer women away from jobs outside of their household. This radical measure was first undermined in 1988, when the Prime Minister Mir-

Hossein Mousavi, instructed that state-run childcare facilities should be instated for the children of government workers. This was the first step for women to gradually re-enter the workforce.

### **Role of NGO's**

Non-governmental organizations played an important role in overthrowing the Shah and the years following the Revolution. As mentioned in the last chapter, dozens of women joined the guerrilla force and fought on the frontlines in the hopes of a new and better leader that would improve their current situation and expand their rights.

### ***The Mujahidi and Female Vigilante Groups***

The *Mujahidi* organization is just one example of the guerilla warfare groups that welcomed women to join in the fight against the Shah. Founded in 1967, several years before the revolution of 1979, the organization played an important role during and after the revolution. Among the range of issues the *Mujahidi* fought for was women's rights. Women who joined the *Mujahidi* organization fought for a better future, with expanded rights and equality with men. Within this group, women were assigned important tasks, and were treated on a fairly equal level to that of men (Shoae 526).

Once Khomeini was inaugurated, there was little tolerance for women's organizations. The government used the excuse of their involvement in war with Iraq to justify the closing and dismantling of any women's organization. While many nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) supported the women's cause and their advancement, some NGO's were employed to keep Khomeini's new policies in check. The *dokhtar'an-e Zaynab* was female vigilante group that

was employed by Khomeini to enforce the dress code, in public and private settings (Mahdi 434). Their role was similar to that of the secret police, closely monitoring women's dress styles, and reporting them if any violations were found.

During the post revolutionary period the outspoken *Mujahidin* group publically advocated for women's rights, and protested the repeals of many laws that women had been subjected to. The organization spoke at multiple universities encouraging women to speak up and demand their rights, and in some cases outright spoke against what Khomeini had preached. The group was politically motivated and therefore its opposition to Khomeini's reforms led to violent attacks on the organization. Hundreds of *Mujahid* supporters were imprisoned or executed including women. The group was forced to leave the country. Its efforts, however, did not cease; the *Mujahidin* group continued to contest Khomeini's reforms from a base in Iraq (Shoae 527).

## **Conclusion**

During the decade Ayatollah Khomeini was in power, women experienced a massive regress in their rights and freedoms both in the public sphere and their personal lives. The repeal of the Family Protection Laws had a significant impact on women's rights and their ability to settle family matters in courts. These laws, which had previously protected some of the social problems women faced, were stripped away. The restrictions placed on women's education, careers, and the closing of child day cares throughout the country, placed several obstacles for women attempting to advance themselves. The tight control exerted over women's appearance limited the way they could express themselves. Makeup, how transparent their stockings were, and the shoes that were worn all became areas of scrutiny that the morals police could use to



detain women. Even laughter that was too loud or too enthusiastic was considered immodest. During the first years after the Revolution of 1979, women had to adjust to a harshly scrutinized way of living.

Ayatollah Khomeini believed in strict gender roles, and expected women to adhere to them. As previously mentioned, he believed that women's character was predisposed to corruption and too emotional to be trusted to make important decisions. Therefore, women were expected to dedicate themselves to activities such as child rearing, maintaining of the household, and caring for their husband (Afshar 61). These were considered the appropriate vocations for women in the eyes of Khomeini.

In post-revolutionary Iran, women staged various protests to demand their rights and demonstrate against the changes that were being imposed on them. The imposition of the veil and revocation of the Family Protection Laws led to massive protests by the women's movement. However, all of these demonstrations were met with violent counter strategies by the regime (Mahdi 435). Despite their efforts Khomeini did not allow women several of the basic rights and freedoms they were demanding until much of the male population in the country was needed to fight in the Iran-Iraq war. The men of the country left a vacancy in the workforce that Khomeini allowed women to fill (Moghadam 13). As the war raged on more and more women returned to the workforce and infiltrate previously male dominated professional work areas.

NGO's played an important role in organizing the women's movement and providing them with an alternative to the tight control of the Islamic government. Many women who desired to advance themselves resorted to joining nongovernmental organizations that accepted

women, such as the *Mujahidin*, since there were very few and limited options for women who did not agree with the new restrictions placed on women.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE KHAMENEI ERA**

### **Religion and Culture**

Ayatollah Khamenei assumed power in 1989 after the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini. Under the leadership of Khomeini, the country experienced a political and religious leader consolidated into one. The creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Khomeini signified there was no longer a separation between church and state. The merging of religion and the government meant that being a pious Muslim and a good citizen were now one and the same. The Quran was in many cases distorted to justify the repeal of old laws and the creation of new ones. Under Khamenei, the religious fervor seen after the revolution settled down and the main focus of the state shift from implementing religious beliefs to advancing Iran to be competitive in the international arena. This shift allows women to once again begin to pressure the government for their rights.

Today, many believe Khamenei wishes to appear as a benevolent leader whose main objective is to provide guidance and uphold the values of the revolution and Islam, rather than an imposing political power. Most foreigners regard his role as more of a “just” leader within Iran and do not believe that he maintains a high level of power. Although it may seem as though Khamenei lost most of his political power in order to become an impartial religious leader, nothing could be further from the truth.

### **Policies**

Even with the position of Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei has successfully avoided notoriety within the international community and only recently have international leaders begun

inquiring about Khamenei's role in Iranian society. In the past, the spotlight has always been on the position of President rather than the Supreme Leader in the international community. This has allowed Khamenei to work at a sort of "behind the scenes" level, and avoid scrutiny from foreign powers. Indeed even today, a search for Khamenei on Google will provide you few hits and limited information; whereas a search for Khomeini will give you almost ten times the amount of information than that of the current leader of Iran. While hits on Google may not provide you with much information on Khamenei, the fact remains that as the Supreme Leader of the country he retains a vast amount of power.

In the last months of his reign, Khomeini changed the constitution of the country to provide the Supreme Leader with an extensive amount of power to override almost any political institution within the country; making the Supreme Leader's power over Iran unparalleled. Due to these changes in the constitution, Khamenei is responsible for the direct or indirect appointment of the key people in all areas of Iranian society. He has the ability to appoint the leaders of the Revolutionary Guards, Parliament, and the Judiciary. He also maintains control over the Guardian Council. This council is composed of 12 members and has the ability to examine presidential elections and veto Parliamentary decisions. This is a great source of power for Khamenei, and can serve as a way to implement his policies, if they are initially circumvented or challenged. In addition all major decisions by these institutions must be approved by Khamenei (Bill and Springborg).

Due to the fact that Khamenei did not have the charisma or speaking skills that Khomeini possessed and had used to fuel the revolution, many did not expect much of the new leader and

anticipated his demise. Yet, Sadjadpour outlines in his article *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* what he believes are the five factors that helped Khamenei consolidate and keep power throughout the past several decades. The first is an extensive network of important leaders who have been placed throughout government bureaucracies to ensure he maintains his authority. The second is the weak Parliament which is mostly dominated by conservatives and headed by Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, who is deeply loyal to Khamenei and whose daughter is married to his son. Third is the fact that the Revolutionary Guards have all been directly appointed by him and have gained significant political and economic power, therefore feel indebted to him. Fourth is the lack of participation in politics by Iran's youth. With more than half of Iran's population under the age of 33 (Mahdavi 446), the lack of participation encourages the government to make decisions without fear of being challenged by the people. Finally the victory of Ahmadinejad over Khamenei's chief rival in the 2005 election ensured that Khamenei remain in power (Sadjadpour). Sadjadpour lists these five factors as the key reasons Khamenei has been able to maintain power without being openly challenged throughout the decades.

All of these factors ensure that Khamenei maintains power in both the social and political aspects of Iran. The Revolutionary Guards protect his power at the social level ensuring he is not challenged by outspoken citizens, while his alliances with the President and the leaders of Parliament allow him to have political power. In addition, his influence over the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto any initiative from Parliament, allows him to remain in control even if an initiative passes through Parliament or some other secondary institution.

While many changes have occurred in Iran since the Revolution of 1979 the ideals of Khomeini in regards to the strict Islamic dress code, the mandatory *hijab*, as well as the core values of the revolution have transcended onto Khamenei, and have strongly resonated in Khamenei's political and social ideals. This can most clearly be noted in his speeches where he frequently addresses the ideals of the Revolution of Justice, Islam and Independence from the West, as well as the fact that the mandatory *hijab* is still in effect today (Jahanpour 153). Furthermore the *hijab* has become a symbol of the effectiveness of the Islamic Republic. It has been used as a measurement to gauge the effectiveness of government initiatives.

### ***Education and Career***

Women living under the reign of Khamenei have made significant progress in ending factors that oppress them. At the beginning of Khomeini's reign after the 1979 Revolution women became severely limited in the subject areas they could study. Gynecology and teaching were among the few subjects that women were allowed to study (Mahdi 434). A higher importance was placed on the woman's role in the home. The upbringing of pious children was considered the highest occupation a woman could have. Under Khamenei many restrictions regarding the subject area that women could study have been revoked. Women now enjoy the freedom to study nearly any subject they choose, and can be seen working in the industrial, political, cultural, and entertainment sectors among others (Mahdi 441). In addition, an increasing number of women have pursued higher education in modern day Iran. Today estimates place women at 57% in university enrollment rates, compared to the 25% before the revolution, surpassing their male counterparts in enrollment. In addition 60% of girls ages 15-18 are enrolled at a high school level education (Mahdi 441). In past decades, pursuing higher

education for women allowed them to have a certain degree of freedom outside their household. It was pursued by women who wanted independence and to advance themselves. In today's Iran, these ideals and reasons for enrolling in a university and obtaining a degree have prevailed. The prominent number of Iranian women enrolled in universities demonstrate society's acceptance for women to pursue roles outside the home and the increasing independence of women.

The government of Iran has also been taking strides to lower the disparity between men and women in society. According to a report from Iran to the United Nations, the government's budget for women's affairs in Iran was increased 226% in 2003, in comparison to 2002. Several institutions have been added to the government to deal with women's affairs and provide them with protection, such as the Office of Women's Affairs and the Social and Cultural Council of Women. Pressure from various women's groups has also managed to revoke or amend several laws in the constitution that have historically oppressed women (Afshar 67). Clause 5 of the Constitution was amended in 1992 to allow the appointment of qualified women judges. After the revolution, the post of judge was unattainable to even the most qualified of women (UN-Iran Women Report).

Today, although there are still discrepancies between the numbers of women judges to that of men judges, the government has recognized that there are women who are qualified to fill the position. In 1997, Clause 3 of the Constitution was amended to include that each case within the family courts must be reviewed with the presence of a women judicial advisor and that "the ruling must be administered after consultation with the woman judicial advisor" (UN-Iran Women's Report). This allowed a woman's perspective to be taken into consideration when

providing a ruling in the family courts. Article 1133 of the civil code stated that a husband could divorce his wife at any time of his choosing, this law was amended to state that he would have to file a divorce lawsuit with the courts. In addition, an amendment was added to include that woman could also initiate and file a divorce lawsuit. There have been a multiple of laws enacted to protect women and expand their rights since the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini. Laws have been added that denote what the proper care and amenities for a wife, as well as care of underage or sick children (UN-Iran Women's Report 43). All these laws specify rights that women have gained through the legal system. The government of Iran has realized that women play an important part of both the social and economic growth of a country.

### ***Family Planning***

In the early 1990's, the government realized that the high rate of population growth was unsustainable by the regime. Khomeini desired to create an army of millions within Iran and had encouraged women to have as many children as possible to sustain this army. All family planning initiatives were shut down, and with a greater pressure for women to have large families and remain at home. The result was an increase in the population by 14 million new citizens (Kian 81). The government recognized that there were simply not enough jobs, or housing for the huge number of growing young people in Iran. As a result birth control initiatives to curb the rate of the country's population growth were once again established. The government began to promote the idea that an ideal family consisted of four individuals, and that there were numerous benefits for a small family (Kian 81). Women were once again able to obtain birth



control, and religious leaders also began to promote the benefits of birth control in their speeches.

All of these changes to the legislation reflect Khamenei's stances on many subjects since these amendments and laws had to be approved by him. This shows that while the late Khomeini placed a high importance on family and attempted to steer women into more of a family orientated role than an educational or working role, Khamenei does not necessarily share those ideals. Although the family role is still extremely important in Iranian society and the proper upbringing of children is still regarded as a pivotal responsibility for women, the advances in society now allow women to pursue alternative roles outside of the family. Khamenei has allowed through the passing of several laws for women to gain some protection and advancement in modern day Iran demonstrating that he acknowledges the importance of women's role in society.

### **Role of NGO's**

Non- governmental organizations (NGO's) have had a significant impact in expanding women's rights and views in post-Khomeini Iran. Under Khamenei, women have reorganized themselves and created many outlets for their opinions to be voiced. Among these outlets is a new surge of women's magazines. Whereas before the revolution, there was only one official women's magazine, today *Zanan* and *Farzaneh* are two of the many Islamic women's magazines that are published in Iran. Although their view point may not always coincide both magazines agree that their primary function is the advancement of women, as a result an "unprecedented gender solidarity has emerged between secular and modernist-Islamist women" (Kian 91). These

magazines aim to reach educated women, as well as politicians in order to advance women's social and legal status by bringing to light women's current issues within society, and proposing new solutions to them. Women's magazines address a multitude of controversial issues, including divorce, custody rights, and abuse. They aim to create an environment where women are less tolerant of these abuses, and will fight against the stereotypes placed upon them. As a result these magazines frequently verbally attacked by the conservatives and physically attacked by organized groups such as Hezbollah (Kian 94).

NGO's also provide a legitimate excuse for women to gather and exchange ideas without raising suspicion from the government, or in some cases family members. Social organizations and forums have become a meeting location separate from men where women can congregate and not feel pressured by their male counterparts to express a particular viewpoint. Instead these organizations allow women to explore new ideas and discuss both national and international problems without fear of repercussions (Mahdi 444).

Although NGO's play an important part in expanding the women's movement it is difficult to identify these different organizations since they are found in many aspects of Iranian society. NGO's can take many forms, from sports games to religious gatherings, all of these are places where women meet to converse about their ideas in a safe environment. The government may also grant NGO's' funding to promote different initiatives, such as teaching women skills that can be used to generate income, and allow them to become more independent.

## **Conclusion**

Although women have gained significant social rights in areas such as schooling and their career, their legal rights are still outdated. Many laws have been formed to attempt and

correct this situation but the fact remains that in Iran today, a woman may not have enough legal recourse to change a situation, in their lives if they desire to do so, especially in the rural areas. Women's voices are still regarded as lesser than men's, and the court system may seem inaccessible to some women. In the rural parts of Iran where education is not as easily accessible to women as in the urban cities, many of the traditional notions of women still remain. Legal courts may not be anywhere near these women, and they may not know their options or protocol to get themselves out of a bad marriage or explore their role outside the family. There is still a vast disparity between women and men in leadership positions such as the cabinet, parliament, and court rooms.

Regardless of these challenges, in recent years the government of Iran and its leaders has been placing more and more importance on allowing women to have better opportunities in the workforce and become more equal to the status of men through initiatives, and women's centers. Under the leadership of Khamenei women have been allowed to advance significantly in comparison with the years directly after the Revolution of 1979 when many of their rights and freedoms regressed. The women's movement is slowly moving forward. Many scholars critique the slow moving process and blame the lack of communication between different women's groups. Although all of the organizations are moving towards the same goal, some have called it a "collective action without actors" (Mahdi 443), referring to the fact that there seems to be no single identifiable source pushing the movement forward.

Evidence of the advancement of women can be seen in various sectors throughout Iran. Women have been constantly pushing the boundaries in order to gain many of their rights and

freedoms. Today, the percent of women participating in the labor force has nearly tripled since 1986 (Kian 84). In the last election for the *Majilis*, nine women were elected into the high-ranking position, four of which were from the provinces and five from Tehran (Kian 84). Pressure from the women's groups as well as individual women have led to the opening of many NGO's and have forced the government to address women's issues.

Despite these facts in modern day Iran there are women in the universities and the workplace, and a rise in the percentage of girls enrolled in school. The hard efforts of these women to prevail in a society that placed them at a disadvantage demonstrate their perseverance and their persistence to better themselves and the future of women in Iran. Today, the women's movement is still undergoing. Women are trying to change their current situation and expand their rights further to gain equality with men.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this final chapter I begin by providing the highlights of my three major chapters, a table where I compare and contrast my three case studies based on the impact they had on women, and lastly I propose future research questions.

Women in Iran have experienced many fluctuations in their rights with the changes in leaders and regimes. The Shah of Iran attempted to change many aspects of Iranian society in his quest to westernize the country. During his rule, religion was an important aspect of society but it was not the main focus. In accordance with the Shah's attempt to westernize the country he attempted to separate the government from religion, and enforced a westernized dress code on society. The unveiling of society, the white revolution, and family planning were all initiatives the Shah undertook in order to realize his vision for Iran.

The Family Protection Laws expanded women's rights by providing them with various social protections, such as the ability to initiate divorce and custody rights of their children. Women's organizations flourished for a time during the rule of the Shah, but due to his fear of being overthrown, they were slowly shut down until women no longer had a place where to congregate. With the increase in political fervor by the women's movement against the Shah, he eventually decided to reopen some women's centers in an effort to steer women into a less political environment, and gain their support. However, these centers do not remain open for long, since the environment in Iran becomes more political and the Shah's fear of losing control of the population causes him to close any place where people could congregate and share ideas. In addition, during this time the SAVAK, or secret police, increase their coercion tactics to try

and keep the population under control, which greatly limit rights and freedoms for women within Iran. Women in the year before the Revolution of 1979 experienced an increase in their freedoms by joining nongovernmental organizations, such as the guerilla movement, which allotted them the same responsibilities as their male counterparts and treated them equally.

The deposing of the Shah and instatement of Khomeini as the new leader of Iran had grave implications for women. During the time of Khomeini, religion was the main focus of the government, and there was no longer a separation between the government and religion. In fact, Khomeini advocated the appointment of officials into the government based on their knowledge of Islam as opposed to their knowledge of the law or qualifications for the position. His vision was to create the first pure Islamic nation of the world.

After the revolution, women experienced a revoke of many laws they were accustomed to, such as the Family Protection Laws. A new strict Islamic dress code was enforced, and women had to be accompanied by a male relative at all times. The government attempted to impose the separation of the sexes on society, to which they were partially successful in areas such as sporting activities, public transportation, and schools; but not in universities, grocery stores, and private transportation. Tight restrictions were placed on women seeking higher education or careers, and women were barred from studying in over 69 different areas that were not considered gender appropriate. Government workers and judges were all discharged from their post, and women were encouraged to stay at home and raise children. The women's movement regressed during this time period and women lost many rights they had already earned.

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, created a vacancy in the position of Supreme Leader, which was filled by Ayatollah Khamenei. During the era of Khamenei religion was once again not the main focus of the government. Instead, Khamenei's focus was on making Iran competitive in the international arena and the advancement of the country. This shift in focus allows women to pressure the government for their rights and for the women's movement to gain momentum. Throughout Khamenei's time as Supreme Leader, women have made significant advancements, women's centers have reopened, and many of the laws lost with the revocation of the Family Protection Laws have been restored. In Iran today, there are a higher percentage of women in universities than men, and the restrictions on the subject areas women can study have been lifted. Although many of these issues have been addressed by the government, and there is a greater funding in Iran today than historically for women's organizations, women are still not equal to men. There is a vast disparity in high-ranking political positions and leadership roles between women and men, and women are not afforded the same advantages men are. In many places within the country, especially in the rural areas, the disparity between women and men is even higher.

	Religion/Culture	Leaders/Policies	Role of NGO's	Status of Women
Shah	Secular, Not Religious.	Western-style reforms.	Neutral towards non-political NGO's. Supported women's social rights.	Promoted social rights, while regression of political ones.
Khomeini	Religion is main focus.	Conservative Islamic Reforms	Against political women's organizations.	Increased freedom before revolution, regression in social rights after revolution.
Khamenei	Religious, but religion is not main focus.	Allowed women to regain some social and political rights.	Allows women's organizations and supports education of women.	Significant increase in freedoms and rights since time of Shah and Khomeini.

Comparison of Policy Eras 1

### Observations

While many believe that women enjoyed the most rights and freedoms under the rule of the Shah of Iran, I do not necessarily believe this is the case. During the era of the Shah of Iran, women had benefits such as the Family Protection Laws and few restrictions on their education. The fact that the Shah was considered an ally to the Western world, and that his aim to modernize Iran, paints the picture that women within the country enjoyed the same lifestyle and freedoms as women in the west. The act of unveiling the population may be seen by many in the West as a significant achievement and advancement, when in reality it had many negative repercussions on the society, and took away the essential freedom of choice for women who wanted to remain veiled. Furthermore, the media was tightly controlled by the Shah in his attempts to hold off the rebellion. Women's centers and magazines were shut down and viewed as a threat where ideas could be discussed and uprisings could occur. In addition, the tight control exerted by the SAVAK made it impossible for a free society to flourish for both men and women.



I believe that the year before the revolution was the time period when women experienced an expansion in their freedoms. During this time, period the Shah of Iran was rapidly losing control of the population while Ayatollah Khomeini was gaining momentum. This resulted in a brief period of a sort of anarchy where women were neither controlled by the Shah nor the Ayatollah and therefore joined forces and focused on overthrowing the Shah. Women were encouraged to fight in various guerilla warfare movements. As addressed in previous chapters, NGO's such as the *Mujahidin*, which accepted women into their organization, treated them equal to their male counterparts, and allowed them to carry out important tasks. The encouragement of Ayatollah Khomeini for women to rise up against the Shah gave women hope that in the new era of Iran after the Revolution, their freedoms and rights would expand and they would gain equality.

Yet in the years directly after the Revolution of 1979, women experienced the opposite. Ayatollah Khomeini's goal of creating the first Islamic state interfered with the expansion of women's rights. As a result, many of the rights they had gained and were accustomed to were revoked and women found themselves in a worse position than under the rule of the Shah. The Family Protection Laws that addressed family matters were revoked, and males were granted preference in all matters pertaining to family issues. Divorce could no longer be initiated by a woman, if a woman desired a divorce, she would have to prove beyond doubt that she deserved it. Also if an unjust divorce suit was brought up against a woman she was responsible for proving her innocence. Conservative Islamic dress codes were enacted that dictated all aspects of a woman's attire. The mandatory *hijab* was instated, women could not wear see-through stockings, make up, or have their clothes too fitted around their waist. If any of these codes were broken

the moral's police could detain and arrest the women for immodesty. A court ruling during this time period declared that women's voices were to be valued at half of that of a man's in court, and many cruel and unusual punishments were added to the government, such as stoning to death for adultery, and removal of lipstick by razorblade if it was found on a woman.

I believe educated, working women were the ones who suffered the most under this era in Iran. Women who had a post within the government or as a judge were forced to resign due to what Khomeini referred as "unstable" and "hormonally" predisposed characters that hindered them from making objective decisions. Any woman, who wanted to expand her role outside of family care giving, was labeled as "immoral," "westernized," and a threat to the new Islamic state. Khomeini's desire to create the first pure Islamic state, and a model for the world, hindered the women's movement and caused women's rights and freedoms to regress, putting women at a disadvantage.

Significant power was consolidated and given to Ayatollah Khamenei; he decided to use his influence to attempt and advance Iran rather than focus on the religious aspect of the new republic. This shift in focus allows women to once again pressure for their rights and expand their freedoms. Women's centers and grassroots initiatives helped pressure the government to gain back some rights that had been lost and expand others. The loss of the Family Protection Laws directly after the revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini placed many women at a disadvantage regarding family issues, and provided them with little recourses to challenge a court ruling. Under Ayatollah Khamenei, women have recuperated many of these rights.

In contemporary Iran, divorce can be initiated by both men and women, and custody of minor and sick children is given to the mother rather than the father or a male relative. Other changes in the constitution have now allowed women to become judges, which was previously prohibited. The government has also heavily invested in women's organizations and in initiatives that empower women, such as projects that teach women useful skills that can be used to produce an income so that they can have a higher degree of independence. During the era Ayatollah Khomeini, the woman's role in society was to create large families, raise the children, and take care of the husband. Khomeini believed that this was the highest role a woman should pursue. The elimination of child care centers, elimination of family planning initiatives, and restrictions on subjects women could study in universities, were all methods employed to try and accomplish Khomeini's goal. However, in the era of Ayatollah Khamenei the government has supported the reopening of child care centers and reinstatement of family planning initiatives, due to pressure from the women's movement. This has allowed women to explore roles outside the household.

In the beginning stages of this thesis, I suspected women in Iran to be in a position similar to the one after the revolution, with few rights, and little progress to their advancement as a result from the strict Islamic government. What I have found is that this is not the case. Women in Iran have made significant strides in regaining their rights and freedoms since the time of the Shah, and Khomeini. I believe that the leaders of Iran have most of the power to change the situation of women, especially after Khomeini consolidated the power of the Supreme Leader of Iran significantly. I believe the leaders have the most power because Iran has historically had leaders with substantial amounts of power. The Shah of Iran had the power to employ royal

decrees to force policies onto the population, many of which had an impact in women's lives, such as the granting of Women's suffrage. Ayatollah Khomeini further consolidated the power with the creation of the post of Supreme Leader, and allowed for the leader of Iran to circumvent many government institutions to guarantee his initiatives are passed. This is why I believe that the leaders in Iran have sufficient power to change the situation of women if they so desire. The women's movement has had great success pushing their agenda and expanding women's rights and freedoms, but there is still a lot that can be improved in Iran for women. I have found that for the women to further expand their rights and freedoms there needs to be an increase communication between women's groups. In Iran today, many organizations are working towards the same goals but not in a collective manner. If there was greater communication between these groups to pressure the leaders of the government, I believe that women have a greater chance at accomplishing their agenda.

### **Future Research**

In future research, it would be interesting to study the difference in the women's movement in the rural and urban areas of the country and what initiatives in these different sectors are taking place to empower women and expand their rights and freedoms. I have found in my research that the urban sector is generally more lenient and open to the initiatives of the women's movement, whereas the rural sectors of the country tend to be more conservative. Therefore, I would expect there to be different initiatives taking place in the different sectors. Another interesting aspect for more detailed research would be how much power the role of president actually possesses within the country. The research indicates that a greater deal of power rests in the hands of the Supreme Leader. In addition, the guardian council and parliament

do retain power as well, which leaves very little room in my mind for the president to also possess power and be able to exert his influence. I would expect the president in Iran to have power, but to have to have his initiatives reviewed by the Supreme Leader of Iran. An interesting scenario would be to have a president that disagrees with the Supreme Leader, which has not occurred yet. In that case, I do not know what courses of action the president could take to circumvent the Supreme Leader's power; but these would be questions that could be addressed in future research, and require a more in-depth look at contemporary Iran.

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